

The Historical Event

For the process of truth to begin, something must happen. What there already is—the situation of knowledge as such—generates nothing other than repetition. For a truth to affirm its newness, there must be a *supplement*. This supplement is committed to chance. It is unpredictable, incalculable. It is beyond what is. I call it an event. A truth thus appears, in its newness, because a supplement interrupts repetition.

—Badiou

I never thought we would see the day when an African-American and a woman were competing for the presidency of the United States [. . .]. [T]his is not a piece of history that is happening to someone else; this is happening to us.

—Hillary Clinton

We're on the brink or cusp of doing something important; we can make history. [. . .] We can make history by being, [for] the first time in a very long time, a grass-roots movement of people of all colors.

—Barack Obama

*R*ecent discussion on the periphery of mainstream historical studies has revealed the extent to which “belonging to history” (rather than being “outside of it”) or “having a history” (rather than lacking one) have become values attached to certain modern quests for group identity. From the perspective of groups claiming to have been excluded from history, history itself is seen as a possession of dominant groups who claim the authority to decide who or what is to be admitted to history and thereby determine who or what will be considered to be fully human. Even among those groups that pride themselves on belonging to history (here understood as being civilized) or in having a history (here understood as having a real as against a mythical genealogy), it has long been thought that history is written by the victors and to their advantage and that historical writing, consequently, is an ideological weapon with which to double the oppression of already vanquished groups by depriving them of their historical pasts and consequently of their identities as well.

Although it has long been claimed that “history” is a place in and a condition of being of everything that is “truly” human and that “history” is a universal process or relationship (like entropy or gravity), “history” itself shows that “history” was invented and cultivated as a learned science in the West, is based on specifically Western, aristocratic, racist, gen(d)eric, and classist preconceptions, and is no more “universalist” in its applicability to other cultures than Christianity or capitalism. So to view “history” as a “gift” of unalloyed value and usefulness to those who are seeking to enter it or belong to it may be delusory. It is within the context of this problematic that I wish to address the question of the nature, meaning, and discursive function of the historical event.

Let me stress that by the term “history,” I mean “the past,” to be sure, but also something other and much more. Every individual and every group has a past, just by virtue of having a genetic and a cultural endowment of some kind. But a past made up of a genetic and cultural endowment is not the same thing as a historical past. In our time, which is that of late modernity, a specifically historical past is created by professional or in some way socially authorized investigators of what is only a virtual past as long as it has not been established as having really happened on the basis of evidence of a specific kind and authority. This historical past is a construction made by selecting from the wide range of all the events of the human past a specific congeries of those events that can be established as having happened at specific times and places and can be fitted into diachronically organized accounts of a group’s self-constitution over time.

As Michael Oakshott has argued, this historical past is quite different from “the practical past” that most of us carry around in our heads in the form of memory, imagination, snippets of information, formulas and practices that we perform by rote, and vague ideas about “history” that we draw on in the course of a day for the performance of tasks as various as running for president of the United States, justifying a policy of war or economic adventure, planning a party, or arguing a case at law (18). The historical past exists only in the books and articles written by professional investigators of pasts and written for the most part for one another rather than for the general public. This historical past is, according to the doxa of the professionals, constructed as an end in itself, has very limited if any practical usefulness, and contributes only minimally to the understanding of what ordinary folk regard as “the present.” It is ironic that, as professional historical studies have become more and more scientific,

they have become less and less useful for any practical purpose, including the traditional one of educating the laity in the realities of political life. Modern historical studies are genuinely dianoetic in aim and method, contemplative rather than active in kind. For modern historical studies, a historical event is any occurrence that lends itself to investigation by the techniques and procedures currently in force among the guild of professional historians. Such an event may make its appearance in the practical life of a given society or other kind of group, but insofar as it can be studied as a “historical” event, it is moved out of the category of past events that can be utilized for practical purposes and removed into that “historical past” that renders it now only an object of contemplation rather than a tool or instrument to be used in the present for practical ends.

Since the time of Herodotus, there have been conventions, rules, and procedures for deciding what kind of events can be legitimately considered to be “historical,” on what grounds and by what kind of evidence events can be established as facts, and how to relate any given historical account of any given body of historical facts to other accounts and facts of a properly historical kind. In modernity, historical events are thought to belong to the class of “natural” events but to be antithetical in kind to “supernatural” events. So, too, historical accounts are thought to belong to the class of narratable processes¹ but to be antithetical to the kind of narratives called “myths” and to any kind of “fiction.”

According to the Western ideology of history,² “history” came into existence at a particular time and place, developed among the peoples inhabiting that time and place, expanded in time and space with the expansion of Western civilization, and is in fact properly recounted as the story of how this expansion into the rest of the world occurred. “Modern” (itself a Western notion and mode of social existence) practitioners of history purport, of course, to have drained the notion of “the historical” of its cultural specificity as a distinctively Western ideology and to have constituted it as a “soft” but nonetheless universal science. But whereas a modern physical science might be taken up by a given culture without necessarily requiring abandonment of dominant traditional values and institutions, it is questionable whether non-Western cultures can take up “history” without jettisoning much of their traditional cultural baggage—any more than non-Western traditional cultures can take up Christianity or capitalism without losing their distinct identities based on their presumed relationship to a past that may have nothing “historical” about it at all.

Thus, “history,” or so it might seem, is or has been for most of the last two millennia a *construction* and a value in the West, while other cultures have chosen to relate to their pasts in ways sometimes similar to but ultimately different from the “historical” way.⁵ It is for this, and a number of other reasons, to be sure, that *theories* of history have been developed in recent times, in the West and elsewhere, directed at the identification of ambiguities of the kind usually ascribed to ideologies, myths, and religions rather than those found in scientific disciplines. In other words, there has been an effort in recent times to “deconstruct” history in much the same way that “man,” “race,” “gender,” “literature,” “society,” and other mainstays of Western humanism have been deconstructed. Excluded and subaltern groups have objected, of course, to this theorization of history as yet another tactic designed to foreclose their claim to “belong to history” quite as much as their oppressors or to “have a history” of their own that founds their identity similarly.

Yet, theory of history (as against historiological theories or theoretical considerations about the nature and uses of historical knowledge) developed within Western culture at a particular moment in the evolution of historical studies, the moment at which it was professionalized, academicized, and began to lay claim to the status of a (modern) science.⁴ There can be no science in the modern sense without theory, and indeed it is a sign of the modernity of a given field of scientific activity to be divisible into a “theoretical” and a “practical” (or “applied”) dimension. Prior to this moment in its development, historiographical composition was treated as a perfectly “natural” or ordinary activity that could be practiced by anyone endowed with “letters” and the learning required to read old documents or interrogate witnesses of past events effectively. Prior to this moment, differences might be entertained as to the “meaning” that could be derived from the study of past public affairs, especially when claims of a religious or politically sectarian nature regarding certain events of the past were concerned, but these were not so much “theoretical” as, rather, “practical” matters—insofar, especially, as they required the effort to establish “the facts” at issue as a necessary preliminary to the assessment of their possible meaning.

To those for whom the Incarnation or the Resurrection or the Descent of the Holy Spirit were already taken as fact on faith, the problem of the relation of fact to meaning was already resolved relatively easily. By contrast, for the scientific historian, the only possible factuality to be accorded to these allegedly “miraculous” events would be their status as

beliefs held by specific people at specific times and places. The factuality of the events themselves would have to be treated as having been based on evidence of a kind not to be admitted in historical (or, more precisely, historiological) discourse.

Obviously, in cases like the last mentioned, scientific historians would be concerned as much about the nature of the events under question as they would about the nature of the evidence offered in support of their factuality. In history, any reported event of whatever kind, natural or miraculous as the case might be, has to be treated as a potential fact since to rule out any given reported event as impossible in advance of investigation of the evidence of its occurrence would violate the empiricist principles governing historical inquiry from the origins of the genre. But the very distinction between natural events and miraculous events indicates the importance of the distinction between event and fact in historiological discourse. Since a miraculous event is a manifestation of a power outside of nature and a fortiori outside of history, a miraculous event is the one kind of event that can never be treated as a historical fact.

The canonical version of the distinction between an event and a fact has it that “a fact is an event under a description”—where “description” can be understood as consisting of a perspicuous listing of attributes of the event—or a “predication”—by which an event is assigned to its proper kind and, usually, given a proper name.⁵ An event cannot enter into a history until it has been established as fact. From which it can be concluded: events happen, facts are established. A fact may be construed as a happening in speech or writing and in this sense conceived as an event. But facts are events of a special kind: they are events in speech that are about other speech events and other kinds of events beyond or outside of speech. On this account, a historical fact would differ from other kinds of fact by virtue of the rules prevailing in historical discourses for determining when a given event could be described as the kind of event properly characterized as “historical.”

Now, in general, people who know something about the issue have little difficulty defining “historical event” and distinguishing historical from other kinds of events, pseudo events, and nonevents, natural, supernatural, imaginary, illusory, and so on. And historians in general have good or at least tried and trusted rules for determining how events are to be established as facts or established as having really happened rather than only appearing to have happened or as having been falsely reported as having happened. None of these procedures is scientific in

the sense of requiring experimental replication of the event under laboratory conditions or the subsumption of a given event to the causal laws or relationships governing the class of events to which it may belong. But they are good enough for the kind of crude social uses to which historical knowledge has been contrived to contribute since its invention in Greece during the fifth century B.C.E.

So, let us grant that there are events and there are facts. Let us grant, too, that there are series of events and structures of events that can be factualized, which is to say, dated, placed, described, classified, and named well enough to permit a distinction between “atomic” or individual facts and something like “molar” or macro-facts—“large” facts such as “The Russian Revolution of 1917” or “big” facts such as “The Renaissance.” This would allow us to imagine a wide range of “historical facts” that would make up that “history” that is the object of study of “historians.”

But this way of thinking about history—as an aggregation of facts—begs the question of the status of those “events” that are the content, referent, or necessary condition of facts.

There has been a great deal of discussion of late about the event in general and about the historical event specifically. In historiography, the evental status of the Holocaust is a matter of extensive debate: is or was the Holocaust an event unique to history and therefore incomparable to (or incommensurable with) other events of a similar kind? So, too, for the event now called 9/11. Was the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, an utterly new kind of event, indeed emblematic of a new epoch and paradigmatic therefore of a category of historical events hitherto unimaginable and requiring, consequently, a search for new principles of explanation for its contextualization? Or was it simply an event that happened to have been unexpected in the United States, an event only unimaginable in that context—since, obviously, it was all too imaginable among its perpetrators?

In most of these discussions, that an event occurred does not have to be established. What is at question is the nature of the event, its relative novelty, the scope and intensity of its impact, and its meaning or what it reveals about the society in which it took place. “Things will never be the same,” it has been said of both of the two events; “It is the end of American innocence,” it is said of 9/11; “Never again,” has been one response to the Holocaust.

While responses such as these are both understandable and, if understood figuratively, more than adequately justified, it is not always

registered how such responses implicitly presume a precise idea of what a historical event—as against a natural event—consists of. A natural event, such as an earthquake or an avalanche, will always have been conceivable, imaginable, possible, and, in some locales, even probable. The disastrous consequences of such events attach to the human beings who insufficiently prepared for the occurrence of this type of event in the physical areas affected by them. Thus, although the effects of such events on human beings and groups in a particular place can appropriately be described as “disastrous,” even “tragic,” the same epithets could be used to describe the events themselves in only a figurative way. There are no “disasters” and certainly no “tragedies” in nature. The fact that there are plenty of events in history to which such epithets can be legitimately or at least appropriately applied tells us something about the extent to which “history,” in spite of its efforts to become scientific, remains indentured to mythical notions of the cosmos, the kinds of events that occur in it, and the kinds of knowledge we can have of them.

In our time, many other events made possible by new technologies and modes of production and reproduction have changed the nature of institutions and practices that had remained virtually unchanged for millennia (for example, warfare and health care) and changed them so radically that it has become impossible to write a history of, say, war as a tale of continuous development from the Stone Age to only yesterday. Weapons of mass destruction cause a quantum leap in the *history* of warfare. Antibiotics and genetic engineering change definitively the nature of health care for the foreseeable future. All this suggests that the principles that make historical change possible in the first place may themselves undergo change. Or to put it another way: change itself changes, at least in history if not in nature. If it does, then so, too, can the nature of events change as well.⁶

Can we imagine a new *kind* of event breaking in on our world that might manifest evidence of another, alternative system of existence that differs utterly from our own? Fantasies of alien cultures in outer space and theories of parallel or antithetical universes reflect the wish, hope, or fear of the existence of such alternative places from which new and strange events might emanate. Such fantasies may seem delusory, but they are no more so than our notion of “history” considered as a process made up of conflicting and mutually exclusive societies, cultures, and races each vying with the other for *Lebensraum* and the resources to allow one or another to prevail over all contenders.

But not only that: history itself, with its division into past and present that parses human nature into earlier and later avatars whose differences are often thought to be more striking than any similarities between them, already contains more than enough evidence of radical discontinuity over time. Indeed, history is thought to be composed of events of a kind that effect changes in the common human substrate that amount more to mutations than simply variations on the common heritage. Imagine how different is the kind of event that modernist technology is capable of producing from those that might have been familiar to a peasant of the twelfth century. Certain events in modernity—space travel, genetic engineering, atomic weaponry—are so utterly different from anything previously thought possible that even a modern peasant or bourgeois might be forgiven for taking them as “miracles.” So different, indeed, are certain events of the present moment from anything preceding them that we can readily understand why certain intellectuals might be impelled to speak of “the end of history” or, like Marx, to speak of everything that has happened up until now as “prehistory” or a prelude to the real drama of a humankind that has finally come into its own and escaped what we had thought of as history *and* nature before.

To be sure, Western historical studies have just recently recovered from a sustained attack, mounted from within its own ranks, on the very notion of “event.” I will not recapitulate details of the attack by the *Annales* school in the decades following World War II upon the fetishistic nature of the historical event and the mythical nature of the idea that historical processes possess the kind of coherence found in stories, fables, and legends. Modern(ist) philosophers of history typically distinguish between a tradition of conventional, popular, or amateur historiography centered on events and concerned to dramatize them, on the one side, and a more scientific and enlightened historiography centered on structures, long-term processes (*la longue durée*), and “slow” time, on the other. “Event-history,” it was held, was little more than entertainment and little less than fantasy insofar as it fed the dreams and illusions of a bankrupt humanism. In fact, the French historian Fernand Braudel tried to diminish the focus on the event in historical research because he saw it as the mainstay of a narrativist approach to history, which made history into a drama and substituted emotional gratification for the intellectual satisfaction of science in the process (see Ricoeur).

As a matter of fact, the historiological notion of event is much closer to the dramatic or rather the dramatistic than it is to any possible

scientific conception thereof. Historical narratives run much too smoothly to support any claim to realistic representation of the events they feature as their subject matter. Unlike the kind of natural events (or sets of events) studied by the physical sciences, real historical events run rather roughly and raggedly, largely as a result of the intervention of human agents and agencies into the courses they were originally meant to follow.

Here we encounter another topos in the modernist discourse on the event, that which distinguishes between natural events and historical events on the basis of the presence of human beings—their motivations, their intentions, their desires, their drives—in their enactment. Drama, like epic, is a *mode* of oral, imagistic, gestural, or literary presentation that sets forth an action as a *series* of events within a finite scene but differs from epic in the assignment of different degrees of significance to events in such a way as to permit the series to be grasped as a *sequence* with a beginning, middle, and end. A historical sequence is periodized or parsed into acts and scenes, each of which is related to what follows as a realization or fulfillment of what had come before. But this raises the question: what is the difference between an event that terminates and one that begins a sequence? Or: is a historical event a sign of a rupture in a series and a point of *metamorphosis* from one level, phase, or aspect of the historical continuum to another? Or is it a sign of *transition* from one phase of a continuum to another?

So much is suggested by Alain Badiou's metaphysical discussion of event in *Being and Event*, a discussion neatly summarized in *Infinite Thought*.⁷ He assumes that being is everything that is the case and that there is nothing that is not the case. Nothing new can ever be added to being and therefore no event—understood as an eruption of something coming from outside the totality of being—could ever take place. And yet events *seem* to take place all the time, at least to observers or chroniclers of happenings in the real world. This “seeming to take place” could be construed as an event, but it would belong to consciousness rather than to the world exterior to it.

So how is this kind of event possible? As I understand it, Badiou thinks that events *seem* to occur because there is a disparity between being, on the one side, and the knowledge of being, on the other. Event occurs when knowledge of some hitherto unknown aspect of being has to be added to what had been previously known about being. It is, as it were, this “shock” to the knowledge-system by the insistent nature of a newly discovered truth about being that registers as an event to consciousness. In reality, Badiou

argues, a new bit of knowledge is only apparently new: it is like the discovery of a hitherto unknown prime number in mathematics. It was always “there” (which is to say, was always “nowhere” but among the universe of numbers) only awaiting (as it were) that computer which is endlessly generating new prime numbers of all but infinite length for its registration. As thus envisaged, event is like the sudden awareness that what had been thought of as the last prime number was only the next to the last and, in fact, is, as the computer continues to spit out new prime numbers, rapidly shrinking in rank and substance with each new prime, the penultimate prime number moves down or back as the newest prime appears.

Now, all this would seem to have little to do with any possible understanding of events that occur in ordinary daily experience (whatever that is) or as envisaged by conventional wisdom or by such “practical” disciplines as those cultivated in the human and social sciences. And this is because it is already generally presumed that event merely indicates an occurrence *unanticipated* by current knowledge about the world and its processes.

For example, the important question about events occurring in what Paul Veyne calls “the sublunary world” of “history” is whether any given event is assimilable to one or another of the received knowledge systems available to a given community or whether the event in question requires the revision or even the total abandonment of the system previously thought capable of adequately identifying, classifying, and determining any event’s “propriety” (157). If there is any metaphysical dimension to this notion of event, it attaches to the status of “history” understood as a sphere of existence inhabited by human beings and subject to laws or principles that belong to but deviate slightly from those that govern the rest of “nature.” To be sure, knowledge of this “history” does not include all of the human beings that have ever lived or will have lived over the course of worldly time. Knowledge of history is always fragmentary, incomplete, and partial, which is one reason that events of a specifically “historical” kind can occur and will continue to occur and indeed cannot not occur for the “foreseeable” future. But the historical event begins to look suspiciously like the kind of event that Badiou characterized as a “supplement” to being-in-general. It depends on the positing of a knowledge of being and therefore a knower of it as a condition of possibility of its occurrence. Which means that specifically historical events could not occur before a specifically historical kind of knowledge existed. It would have no ground or context against which to display its newness.

On the other hand, a historical event will appear as new only insofar as it can be recognized as inherently or substantively or potentially belonging to the class of events already recognized as “historical” but is apprehended, at the same time, as being exotic to that class. As thus envisaged, any “new” historical event seems to be both in and out of “the historical.” Here is where “historical research” enters: its aim is to establish whether the new event belongs to “history” or not, or whether it is some other kind of event. The event in question need not be new in the sense of having only recently arrived to historical consciousness. For the event may have already been registered as having happened in legend, folklore, or myth, and it is, therefore, a matter of identifying its historicity, narrativizing it, and showing its propriety to the structure or configuration of the context in which it appeared. An example and even a paradigm of this situation would be the well-known “search for the historical Jesus” or the establishment of the historicity (or ahistoricity) of the “Jesus” who was represented in the Gospels, not only as a worker of miracles but as Himself the supreme miracle of miracles, the Messiah or God Incarnate whose death and resurrection can redeem the world.

The idea that historical events could not have occurred before the idea of history and the category of the historical had been invented is only a logical paradox. Any right-thinking person would know that the idea of history and the category of the historical must have arisen from somebody’s reflection on the kind of events that manifestly differed from some other kind of event, so that the term “history” and the category of “the historical” must derive their meaning from their references to this special kind of event. But let us try to imagine a time before which the idea of history and the category of the historical existed, a time when a number of different kinds of events had been identified but not events of the historical kind. On the evidence available, it seems that the Greeks, who are supposed to have invented the idea of history as an inquiry into the past and the genre of history writing as an account of past events established by such inquiry as having happened, apparently had no word with the signified of our word for “history.”

Thus, Greek ἡ ἱστορία (*historia*) will start by meaning only “inquiry” and then, by metonymy of result for the activity that produces it, come to mean the “findings” resulting from the inquiry and, beyond that, by synecdoche, become a name—“the history”—for the events described in the account understood as “what happened in the (or a) past”—or something like that. The Greek word for happenings in the past was τὰ

γεγενημένα (*ta gegenēmena*), but the term most used to name an *account* of past happenings (whether based on “inquiry” or received tradition) was *logos* (ὁ λόγος). Whence Thucydides’ dismissal of Herodotus as a (mere) “logographer” or teller of stories about the past in order to distinguish what he himself was doing in his “inquiries” into the past and analyses of its processes.

And it should be noted that “logographer” was the term used to characterize an inquirer into the *recent* past in contrast to what might be called (according to Antonin Liakos) an “archaio-logographer,” who investigated the *remote* past.⁸ Thucydides investigated the recent rather than the remote past in order to identify the causes of the wars between Athens and Sparta, so he would qualify as a logographer as much as Herodotus. But his inquiry was not more systematic than that of Herodotus, only differently so—inasmuch as he seems to have used principles of Hippocratic medicine to serve as a model for how to read the symptoms of the plague that destroyed or fatally weakened the Greek city-states and their empires, while Herodotus was content with the kind of general principles enunciated in pre-Socratic philosophy for his explanations of the events he recounted (explanations of the “what goes up must come down” variety). It was the *kind* of systematicity he used that earned for Thucydides the (modern) title of the first “scientific” historian. Which might be taken to mean that he not only placed events in stories but also provided an argument for their relevance to his aim of explaining the causes and effects of the events he was investigating.

On this account, Herodotus can be credited with having invented the specifically historical event and suggesting its difference from the kinds of events that derived from the actions of gods and spirits. Thucydides can then be credited with having invented a version of historical method or procedures for studying and analyzing, rather than merely reporting, what happened in the past in order to understand the present. But whether he was actually “doing” history or bringing a new method to the analysis of the kinds of events Herodotus had investigated is a moot point, it being undecidable whether specifically “historical” events are subsumable under general laws or not. In any case, it was left to the Romans to provide the word *historia*—with its primary meaning of tale or story understood as the kind of account “proper” to the rendition of a series of events into a “history”—as a basis for the notion of the historical event as the kind of event that, although occurring in real rather than imaginary life, could be legitimately presented in the form(s) of the kinds of tales

and fables previously told of gods, demons, ghosts, heroes, and other such supernatural beings. With this development, I would suggest, the idea of history as a truthful account of events that really happened in the past cast in the form of story with a plot is achieved. And this provides at least one way of identifying a specifically historical event. As Paul Ricoeur puts it: a historical event is a real event capable of serving as an element of a “plot.” Or, as Louis O. Mink used to say: a historical event is one that can truthfully be described in such a way as to serve as an element of a narrative (Ricoeur 208).

All this implies that events are not made “historical” solely by virtue of having really happened, having happened in a specific time in the past and at a specific place in this world, and having had some identifiable effect on the contexts into which they erupted. And this because a list of such events, even a list of events in chronological order, might constitute an annals or a chronicle but hardly a history. In order for a given singular event, set, or series of events to qualify as “historical,” the event, set, or series must also be validly describable as if they had the attributes of elements in a *plot* of a story.⁹

Now, the mention of the word *plot* raises another specter that, for professional historians, is almost as threatening as the word *myth*. Not only because the word *plot* is the English translation of the Greek *mythos* but also because *plot* is typically thought to be the device that gives to literary fictions their explanatory effect.¹⁰ The debate over how the insertion of an event into a series in such a way as to transform it into a sequence and provide thereby some equivalent of an explanation for its occurrence—this is a long debate and too long even to summarize here. Suffice it to say that, for our purposes, plot or what I have chosen to call *emplotment* is common to all the kinds of narrative discourse: mythical, fictional, or historical. Thus, it is possible to say that if myths, fictional stories, and histories share a common form (the story, fable, tale, parable, allegory, whatever), they also share a common content, which, following Frank Ankersmit, we may call “narrative substance.”¹¹ The concept of “narrative substance” allows us to say that the historical event, unlike the natural event, is narratable.¹²

The *doxa* of modern professional historical research has it that there are no plots *in* history (the events of the past) any more than there could be a large, all-encompassing, overall plot *of* History (in the sense of a plan or predetermined end, aim, purpose, or telos of the whole trajectory of human development, from the obscure origins to the unimaginable end).

The objection to the so-called master narratives of history, the rejection of which, according to Lyotard, is supposed to be the dominant characteristic of postmodernist thought, is that such fantastic notions as “providence,” “fate,” “destiny,” “progress,” “the dialectic,” and so on are nothing but residues of mythical and religious dreams of the kind long left behind by “modernity.” The general objection to the “master narratives” is that they represent a kind of *teleological* thinking that has had to be overcome for the modern sciences of nature to take shape. There is no teleology in nature, and inasmuch as history belongs to nature (rather than the reverse)—or so it is thought—there can be no teleology in history. And this includes local as well as universal history.

To be sure, human beings and human groups typically *think* teleologically, which is to say, make plans for current and future activities in the light of envisioned ends, aims, purposes. One could speak of human intentions as end oriented and, indeed, in a way that permitted one to use *intentionality* as a basis for distinguishing human from animal nature. But as the poet says, “The best laid plans of mice and men . . .,” and the *doxa* tells us, “The road to perdition is paved with good intentions.” Human beings and institutions may very well plan their activities and practices with an end in view, but to suggest that the destinies of individuals and groups can be predetermined in the way the destiny of an oak tree is predetermined by the acorn from which it springs is a possibility at once comforting and horrifying. Comforting because it takes responsibility away from the subject-agent of history, horrifying because it takes responsibility away from the subject-patient of history. Besides, as it is said, determinism is always what governs other people, never one’s own self—except when one wishes to avoid responsibility for a specific action.

But what if it is possible that human beings are both free and determined, responsible and not responsible, at one and the same time for their actions? To think in this way is, of course, a scandal for the philosopher and foolishness for the man of common sense. And yet . . .

Near the origin of Western philosophy and specifically in the legendary teachings of the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium (d. 265 B.C.E.), we encounter the association of the notion of “event” with that of “destiny” that was to become a commonplace of thought about time on down to Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Badiou. Zeno seems to have taught that every incident occurring in the life of a person was interpretable as evidence of providence’s working to turn what would otherwise be a meaningless jumble of events into a destiny (with its sense that the end of a life

occurs not only at a particular time but also at a particular place—whence our notion of a *destination* as the place we are headed toward).

Here, to be sure, the terms *event* and *destiny* are translated into the elements of a drama with a presumed beginning, middle, and end, a denouement, and a falling off of action after the scene of recognition (*anagnorisis*); and they function more as schemata than as concepts, elements of myth rather than of science, and exude the odor of narrative rather than that of argument. Of course, etymology explains nothing, but the mythological relation between event and destiny indicates the ways in which, in poetic thinking, a problematical term like *event*, with its connotation of both meaningfulness and meaninglessness, can function as an operator in a process in which an image of formal coherency (destiny, fate, *moira*, *telos*) can be used to endow chaos with cosmos. In any event, the relating of event to destiny as figure to fulfillment gave me some insight into what was, to me, a lexicographical surprise: my *Roget's* treatment of “destiny” as an *antonym* of “event” (166).¹⁵

I was looking for the antonym of “event” because I wanted to begin my thought about the historical event by placing it within the matrix of Aristotle’s hermeneutic square, in order to discern what might be its contradictories, contraries, and implicants (ch. 7, no. 19). If “event” is treated as a concept, then precisely because it is a concept, it must have an opposed or antithetical term that tells us what would be its contradictory. The convention that sets “event” in a relationship of contradictoriness to “destiny” suggests that, perhaps, an event can at least be known to be related to the field on or against which it happens, as a “part” of a process *can be opposed* to the “whole” of which it is a part. The event can never be the whole of the process of which it is a part, because “destiny” names the whole process of which any given event is only a part.

But then that leaves us with the problem of identifying the contrary of *event's* antithetical term, that is, *destiny*, which must be, according to Aristotle’s way of reasoning, the “non-destinal,” or anything that is not headed anywhere, has no proper place, no substance, and is therefore only a pseudo event, element of a pseudo destiny (Rämö). And this suggests that whatever an event will finally turn out to be, the one thing that we can say about it is that it is not destiny, that it is not the whole process that might ultimately endow contingency with meaning, the meaning of *place* in a sequence, placefulness, or situation. This is to say that the event is not and can never be the whole of whatever it is a part, element, or factor—except at the end, when it comes into its own or finds a place it was destined to

come to at last. Maybe this is what Heidegger had in mind when he spoke of history as *Dasein's* “on-the-way-ness” to a place it would never reach and *Dasein's* fate as *eine Verwendung*, a meandering, a wending, a drift, slide, or roaming that always ends short of a destination, because destiny implies propriety and mankind is *ohne Eigenschaften*.¹⁴

But now, in order to fill out our form of reasoning, we must posit the *contrary* (not the contradictory) of event itself, and if, as we have already indicated, it cannot be either the whole (which is destiny) or those other parts of the whole besides itself, then the event must be something else, which is neither part nor whole of the whole, which can only be, I think, some combination of the non-evental and non-destinal. Whence, I presume, the modern(ist) juxtaposition of event and structure as a model for a scientific construal of the nature of the historical. In modernist thinking, structure stands in for destiny, providence, fate, fortune, and the like, insofar as—as in the structuralist paradigm—the “meaning” of things human must turn out to be nothing other than their form, raised up against a “nature” that, more and more, reveals its meaning as little more than “chaos.” In this model, the event is what disturbs structure, whatever it is that resists incorporation into what is at any given moment “the case.” From an ontological point of view, every event is an embarrassment and a challenge, an embarrassment to the comprehensiveness of structure and a challenge to structure’s power to provide meaning to everything that is the case. Small wonder that structuralism has turned out to be the very antithesis of a historical worldview. As a plenum of events each one of which is an individual happening (a kind of “concrete universal” resistant to subsumption to any universal, on the one hand, and to reduction to an aggregate of particularities, on the other), history appears to be little more than the condition from which any structuralist would wish to escape.

Now, all of this could be quite bewildering if it were not for the fact that, outside the various fields of historical studies and in those disciplines where something like a “historical method” remains a principle component in their operations, the notion of the event has been pretty much discredited as an element of scientific thought. The notion of event remains a staple of a certain kind of literary writing, of the novel, of the romance, of poetry, of theology, and of myth, and so on—kinds of composition called “imaginative” or “imaginary” and generally related by genealogical affiliation to prescientific ways of thinking, explaining, and living with the world rather than living off of it. And indeed, there is a whole body of contemporary writing that suggests that the notion of event

and especially the notion of event informing and authorizing a belief in the reality of “history” is a displacement from mythical modes of thinking and actually has more in common with a religious idea of miracle than with any scientific conception of what an event could possibly be.

This body of contemporary writing has its origins in the hybrid genre of the “historical novel” that, contrary to the rules of the game just being formulated by the historical profession, faces openly the problem of the relation between the past and the present, the ambiguity of “the recent past” and the paradox of the presence of the past in the present—as in Scott, Manzoni, and Dumas, but also Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dickens, Tolstoy, Thackeray, Trollope, Conrad, and a host of lesser lights. It is the historical novel that lays the groundwork of the modernist novel, in which the event begins to dissipate and the line between the past and the present becomes as scumbled as that between consciousness and the unconscious. Modernism, for all its trumpeting of the novelty of “the way we live now,” restores the dignity of the archaic, formerly abandoned by history because of its lack of documentation and consigned to the tender mercies of archeology and the “antiquities,” as a source of meaning for “reality.”

As Auerbach and others argue, modernism is anything but a flight from realism and history. It liberates the historical event from the domesticating suasions of “plot” by doing away with “plot” itself. Moreover, far from abandoning reality for fantasy, modernism shows how much of the fantastic is contained in “the real.” Modernism not only extends the reach of the historical event horizontally, allowing it to wash into adjacent areas of time, it reveals the depths of the historical event, showing how many layers of meaning it conceals, how labile are its pulsions, how resistant to concretion it is.

Modernism probes the depths of the historical event in much the same way that psychoanalysis probes the depths of the psychic event.¹⁵ And indeed, it changes the relation between the event and its context by dissolving the line between them. All of which adds up to the creation of a new mode of literary writing in which the line between factual discourse and fictional discourse is blurred in a kind of writing (the infamous *écriture*) that would destroy the artistic authority of the earlier, nineteenth-century realism. Henceforth, history, the historical event, and historicity itself are taken over by a new kind of writing that, for want of a better term, we may call postmodernist.

However, it is not enough to summon up a “new kind of writing” to account for changes in the way that “history” and its typical content “event” are construed in our time. For a distinctively “historical” way of accounting for the invention of a “new kind of writing” requires us to identify the new “content” or phenomenon for the representation of which the new kind of writing is thought to be adequate. I have already alluded to the “modernist event” as such a content, phenomenon, or referent. Now, I will go further and suggest that the “substance” of the “content” of this new kind of event is provided in the historietheticized idea of “trauma.” The modern provenance of the term *traumatic* is medicine where it is used to characterize a wound, more precisely a penetration of the skin and bone, and the resultant scar, physical and psychological, caused by the penetration. When used to characterize a certain kind of historical event, the term *trauma* and its adjectival form *traumatic* are quite conventional and mean something like a massive blow to a social or political system that requires the kind of adjustment, adaptation, or reaction that any organism must make if it is to survive it.

In the theory of psychoanalysis, however, the terms *trauma* and *traumatic* are used (metaphorically, at first) to indicate a shock to the organism that has the somatic and/or psychological effect of “unbinding” the “drives” formerly held in some kind of equilibrium and thereby producing neurotic or psychopathic states (paranoia, hysteria, obsessiveness, etc.) resulting in the dysfunctionality of the organism. This physicalist conception of trauma (developed by Breuer and Freud in the 1890s) does not differ in any special way from its historiological counterpart in which the historical event is viewed as a significant disturbance of a historical (social) system that throws its institutions, practices, and beliefs into disarray and results in group behaviors similar to those manifested in the conditions of hysteria, paranoia, fetishism, and so on.

But Freud and other psychoanalysts later developed another idea of trauma that presupposed a distinctly “historical” element inasmuch as it involved an element of “afterwardness” (*Nachträglichkeit*) understood as a “(temporally) deferred effect” on the organism strikingly similar to what historiology took to be a specifically *historical* relation between the past and the present. For now, Freud characterized the psychic dimension of trauma as not only a (sudden and disruptive) shock to the organism but one that left *in the psyche of certain kinds of individuals* a kind of place devoid of meaning until, under the press of a later event similar in aspect to the original experience of incursion, this place was

suddenly enlivened or animated so as to disclose a meaning so overdetermined as to wound the organism once more—in fact, to render it doubly wounded, first, by the recall of the original scene of incursion and the sudden discovery of its meaning, and then, by a repetition once more of the original move of fending it off from consciousness, now attended, as it were, by feelings of guilt for not having recognized what it had been in the first place.

There is a similarity between the way historians conceive the relationship between the historical past and the present, on the one side, and Freud's conception of the relationship between a traumatic event in the life of an individual and its "return" to consciousness at some later time but with an impact strong enough to render the individual dysfunctional. The idea of the traumatizing event permits Freud to postulate a "secret history" of an individual and, by extension, of a whole people or nation, against which the "official" account of its past is to be comprehended as an alibi or sublimation in response to guilt feelings derived from the original act. In *Moses and Monotheism (Der Mann Moses und die Monotheistische Religion)*, the theory of the traumatizing historical event permits Freud to postulate a terrible crime in the Hebrew past, that is, the murder of Moses by the people he had saddled with an impossible obligation to the Law, which accounts for the fervid asceticism, self-discipline, failure to become a nation, and restless wandering, guilt, and melancholy of the Jewish people. It is "the return of the repressed memory" of this primal crime—the murder of the Father—that constitutes the past-in-the-present that the Jews, at least, live as "history."¹⁶

To be sure, Freud's notion of the "history" of the Hebrew people bears all the marks of myth—in spite of the gestures it makes to current historical scholarship and his own efforts to sound "scientific." But the idiom of mythagogy is utterly appropriate for the kind of cause-effect relationship between past and present that he calls *nachträglich* (belated). It is "magical," involving as it does such notions as action at a distance, deferred effect, latency, and the like. Freud does not reject or question the conventional historical idea that an event at a given time and place "spreads out," as it were, in both time and space, producing other events to be treated as "effects" of a prior "cause." But he does postulate another kind of event, the true nature and effects of which get buried in individual and collective memory, lie latent therein for an indeterminate amount of time, and then, in response to some later event of similarly invasive effect, resurfaces in a *form* that at once reveals and conceals its remote

prototype. Such an event, the traumatic event, has the structure of the figure-fulfillment model of Hebrew *and* Christian theodicy.

In the figure-fulfillment model, a *significant* historical event will be recognized by its double occurrence, the first time as an *intimation* of a possibility of meaning and the second time as an “expletion,” a filling out or a fulfillment of what was only implicit or, to use a psychological term, latent in the earlier event. The theological models are well known: the substitution of the ram for Isaac in Abraham’s intended sacrifice of his son is an anticipation of the Law of Moses that “fulfills” it; the Fall of Adam that is fulfilled in the Resurrection of Christ, and so on. A secularized equivalent of the figure-fulfillment model in historiological theory would be something like the argument that the remote but determinant cause of the French Revolution was the Protestant Reformation. In Tocqueville’s argument, the Reformation already contains in embryo, as it were, the Revolution that brings down the Old Regime. Mind you, it is not that the earlier event predetermines the later event, or that the later event is to be considered the *telos* toward which everything tends once the Reformation has occurred. This is not a teleological idea of historical causation. No one could have predicted the outbreak of the French Revolution on the basis of whatever knowledge they might have had about the Reformation. It is only after the Revolution had occurred that it became possible to see what the Reformation had made possible.

So it is with Freud’s so-called “traumatic” or “traumatizing” event. There is no absolute necessity for an early molestation of a child by an adult to surface in later life as “trauma” and produce debilitating effects in the adolescent or adult. It all depends upon the occurrence of a second event similar to the earlier one but openly identifiable as what it is or intended to be that triggers the recognition-repression response that now buries or otherwise blocks access to both events and relegates them to a space outside of the “real history” to which they belong. The equivalent in real history would be a kind of schizo-historiology in which the desire to know or obsession with the past is attended by an equally strong aversion to or rejection of any knowledge of the past that threatens the benign version of historical reality constructed as a screen against the threatening truth. I do not have space to go into the matter now, but I would suggest that Kantorowicz’s theory of “the king’s two bodies” analyzes a topos of such schizo-history.

It should be stressed, of course, that Freud was neither a professional historian nor a professional philosopher (of history) and that neither

professional historians nor professional philosophers had any particular reason to regard his concept of the traumatic event as a contribution to the scientific study of history, the historical past, or the historical relation between the past and the present. On the contrary, it may well be that Freud borrowed contemporary myths or notions about history as a model for how to conceptualize a relation between the past and the present of a given individual or nation or people or indeed any group whatsoever in order to conceptualize the kind of relation between present and past he wished to call “traumatic.” Freud was an amateur or dilettante in history, archeology, and anthropology, and he was interested in any kind of knowledge that could be turned to therapeutic use in the treatment of psychologically induced maladies. In other words, he was interested in “the practical past” rather than in the historical past composed by and distilled into the learned tomes of professional historians, anthropologists, and archeologists for the enlightenment of their professional peers.¹⁷

So although he used the work of professional scholars in other fields of inquiry, he was less interested in contributing to those fields of study than using whatever of their lore that could be helpful in conceptualizing a possible treatment for individuals (and groups) suffering from the malady known at that time as “melancholy,” a depressive condition that became chronic when an individual sustained an unthinkable loss of a loved object that the normal or conventional modes of “mourning” failed to alleviate.

Now, the important theoretical point about Freud’s psychoanalytical concept of trauma consists in the fact that, according to Freud himself, there is no such thing as an inherently traumatic *event*. Even the most horrendous kind of loss is responded to by different individuals in different ways, some in the mode of traumatization, others in the mode of mourning, still others in the various modes of sublimation, repression, or symbolization that take place in the process of “working through” the experience of loss. And here it is necessary to stress again the differences between a medical or physiological notion of trauma and the psychological, psychosomatic, or psychoanalytical idea of it. From a physicalist point of view, there could be inherently traumatic events, which would be any event of sufficiently violent force to threaten the destruction of the organism, individual or collective. That such a notion of historical event already exists in the repertory of professional historians is indicated by their use of the concept of “crisis” as a condition through which groups as well as individuals can suffer. But from the standpoint of the psychoanalytical notion

of trauma, there are crises and there are crises. Not all crises, especially the physical ones endured by the organism, are traumatizing of the groups or individuals affected by them. Indeed, trauma names only a particular kind of response to crisis, the way in which it is (only) apperceived rather than perceived as the thievery of self that it will later, under the press of a similar event, be both perceived and understood to have been. What could be a more “historical,” “historiological,” or “historiographical” way of construing the specifically “historical event”? Or to put it another way: what could be a more historiological way of construing a certain kind of psychosomatic event (whether the soma in question be that of an individual or that of a group)?

Is it possible that the specifically historical event is a happening that occurs in some present (or in the experience of a living group), the nature of which cannot be discerned and a name given to it because it manifests itself only as an “eruption” of a force or energy that disrupts the ongoing system and forces a change (the direction or trajectory of which is unknowable until it is launched or entered upon), the end, aim, or purpose of which can only be discerned, grasped, or responded to at a later time? But not just any old “later time.” Rather, that later time when the eruption of what seems to be in some way affiliated with an earlier event reveals or seems to reveal in the fact of that affiliation the “meaning,” significance, gist, even foretelling, though in a masked and obscure way, both of the original event and the later one. Such that the later event can be plausibly represented in a narrative in which it is the fulfillment (or derealization) of the meaning having lain latent and now made manifest retrospectively in the earlier one.

If that turned out to be the case, it would be . . . a miracle.

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Notes

1 Or dramatic processes, by which I mean processes that feature conflict between human beings and other real or imagined forces, powers, and the like, the end or resolution of which turns out to be illuminable of the action leading up to it but in no way foreseeable from any given moment in the process as a whole. The plot

types of the principal genres of Western drama serve as models of counterparts in real history, not in any fictionalizing way but because the kinds of conflicts they schematize are latently possible in the kinds of societies that, as in the West, are capable of having “a history.”

- 2 By “ideology of history,” I mean the view that history is not only a science of the relation between the past and the present but that it is uniquely adequate to the disclosure of the ways that humanity creates itself over time.
- 3 The same can be said of two other ways of representing historical processes in the West, the annals form and the chronicle form. Such genres may feature genuinely historiographical motifs but do not add up to or fulfill the contract implicit in composition of a history. See White, “Value.” On different ways of representing the “historical past,” see the arguments advanced by Goody in *The Theft of History*, the title of which refers, Goody tells us, “to the take-over of history by the west” (1); Hacking; and Sahlins.
- 4 I am trying to introduce some Heideggerian language into the discussions about history, historical knowledge, historical consciousness, and the like: thus, I use the term *history* in the many senses it has in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (see ch. 5, sect. 72–77) and then use *historial* to mean “history-like,” *historiology* to mean the real, para-, pseudo, or pretended “science of history,” *historiosophy* to mean “the kind of wisdom one is supposed to derive from the study of history,” *historiography* to mean “the writing about history,” and so on, possibly, even to *historiogony*, *historionomy*, etc. It is a useless gesture, and I have no hope that it will be taken up in Anglophone discourse, first, because it is too jargonistic, and second, because it might contribute to the clarification of the term *history* and its various derivatives, the vagueness of which is crucial to the maintenance of the myth that the term *history* designates something real.
- 5 The literature on “event” and “historical event” is vast. Every reflection on history ought to have event as a subject of discussion, and any reflection on history that lacks such a discussion is missing something crucial to the understanding of what “history” is all about. A useful summary of the issues involved can be found in Krzysztof Pomian’s magisterial treatment of “evento” in the *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, the first chapter of his brilliant, but for some reason for the most part ignored, book *L’Ordre du temps*. The notion of “fact” as an “event under a description” comes from Danto. See also Badiou; Ricoeur; and Veyne.
- 6 See White, “Modernist.”
- 7 See ch. 2. The structure-event relation is the model most favored by contemporary analysis of the event in the social sciences. See Franko; Mclean’s *The Event and Its Terrors*, which has to do with the Irish famine of 1845 and afterward, an event that was known popularly as “the event” and that inspired a lot of discussion about what exactly a historical event could be; and Sewell, ch. 7, “A Theory of the Event.”
- 8 I have not been able to confirm the existence of the term *archaiolographos* to designate an inquirer into the “origins” or remote past. The term was introduced to me by the historian Antonin Liakos, of the University of Athens, in an essay on classical Greek historical thought that is still, as far as I can tell, unpublished. I adopt it because I want to believe that implicit in the *practice* of the early Greek historians was an important distinction between the recent or proximate past and the remote or absolute past and that the former was the proper domain of what later

- came to be called “historians.” Bernard Williams suggests that historical inquiry is born when the remote past, formerly thought to have been inhabited by various kinds of monsters, gods, fantastic heroes, and the like, as well as men, was suddenly grasped as being inhabited by people just like ourselves and was, therefore, comprehensible by the same principles of understanding used to understand ourselves. See Williams 160–61.
- 9 Although many modern students of Greek culture and language have set *mythos* over against *logos* as “story” to “plot,” *logos* rather than *mythos* is used by Herodotus and others when speaking about the “story” they are telling or wish to tell. In fact, many dictionaries give *mythos* for legend, fiction, or even lie (to *pseudos*) and keep *logos* for a “story” that may be imaginary or true, as the case may be. These differences allow one to keep the distinction between narration (the telling or unfolding of the story) and the narrative (the story told, its “ending” revealed, and the connection between beginning and ending established), even though the Greeks tended to run them together and see their mutual implicativeness in the making of any given “historical” account of the world.
- 10 To be sure, “plot” has equivalents in German (*die Handlung*) and French, Italian, and Spanish, and so on as “intrigue,” “intreccio,” “intriga,” “trama,” etc.
- 11 See Ankersmit’s *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language*, the argument of which is summarized, augmented, and contextualized in his essay “Statements, Texts, and Pictures.”
- 12 David Carr argues that narrative forms an adequate paradigm of historical sequences because human beings in society tend to try to give order to their lives, project plans, and act in accordance with narratological life scenarios.
- 13 After the entry “event,” under “antonyms” I found only the enigmatic instruction: “See Destiny.” Turning to “Destiny.- I. Nouns,” I found: “destiny, fate, lot, portion, doom, fortune, fatality, fatalism, future, future state, future existence, hereafter, next world, world to come, life to come, prospect, expectation,” and, further on: “Antonyms. See Event.” I asked myself in what sense “event” could ever be considered an “antonym” of “destiny.” And then it dawned on me that “event” is antithetical to “destiny” in the sense that the latter connotes not only “fate” but, more generally, “ultimate outcome” of a sequence of happenings, the individual units (or parts) of which are constituted in reaction or response to “eruptions” or rather “interruptions” exogenous to the chain up to the point of their occurrence. This insight, in turn, allowed me to see the probable relation on the semantic level of event to narrative, in which, as Mink and Ricoeur have suggested, a historical event is a contingent occurrence that can be apprehended as having a place in a plot of (some) story.
- 14 The *ohne Eigenschaften* alludes, of course, to Musil’s great novel of the modern(ist) condition that is exactly equivalent to Heidegger’s notion of the “thrownness” of *Dasein* into a world without qualities. Man the wanderer, the homeless being that desires a dwelling place, is endlessly denied such a place because the world into

which he is “thrown” is made of a space in which “places” are only temporary resting points for this being-without-qualities. See Heidegger 322–25 (sect. 277–78).

15 See White, “Modernist.”

16 See esp. part 3, sec. 1, “The Historical Premises.” See Michel de Certeau’s “The Fiction of History,” in which he treats Freud’s text as a novel.

17 See Oakshott, ch. 1

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